

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

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Holiday plants come in all shapes and sizes

By Jim May

It's that wonderful time of year when Virginians of all faiths gather with friends and family to celebrate the holidays. Bringing colorful and aromatic plants inside brightens things up and gives our homes that special holiday feel and smell.

Virginia Christmas tree growers are busy all year planting, tending, shaping, harvesting and selling over a million trees from hundreds of farms all over the state. Many also produce wreaths and other greenery for decorations in our homes and businesses.

There are many retail lots where you can buy live or cut Christmas trees. Choose-and-cut tree farms are becoming very popular, especially for families with children. It can be a great family outing to go in search of the perfect tree. Besides being able to choose a tree, many of these farms have already cut trees for sale, in addition to other services such as wagon rides and seasonal food and drink. Have them bale your tree for easier transport.

Virginia's Christmas tree industry participates in the Virginia's Finest trademark program. Growers whose trees meet standards set by the industry and approved by the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) may apply to use the trademark. Look for Virginia's Finest trees this holiday season.

If you are buying a cut tree, look for one with no dry needles (brush the branches with your hand and see if needles drop). In addition to the popular white pine, Fraser fir, Scotch pine and Douglas fir, many other varieties are grown in Virginia, including Colorado blue spruce, Norway spruce, Red pine and Austrian pine. Trim a half-inch off the bottom when you get it home and immediately place it in water. Check the water level daily.

If you have room to plant a tree in your yard, buy a live balled and burlapped (B&B) tree to set out after the holidays. If you are going to buy a live tree this year, there are a few things to keep in mind:

- Live trees are heavy – a 6' B&B tree can weigh 200 pounds or more.
- Don't keep a live tree in the house more than 7 to 10 days. It will break dormancy and any new growth will be damaged when taken back outdoors. For this same reason, keep it watered and in a cool room.
- When planting, dig a hole 3 times as wide as the root ball, but no deeper. Place the tree in the hole; peel back the burlap to below ground level, backfill, water it well and place a 2 to 3 inch deep protective ring of mulch around the tree.

There are many other live plants to brighten the indoors during the holiday season. Poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) are the most popular, with millions grown and sold yearly. The color of these

Mexican natives comes not from flowers, but bracts, which are modified leaves. It is amazing to see the colors these plants produce, from beautiful red, pink, white, or variegated to multicolored bracts.

Amaryllis (*Hippeastrum spp.*) is another popular holiday plant that can be forced to bloom each year during the holidays. It is a true bulb that originated in the tropical areas of South America. Amaryllis can be found in brilliant red, white, salmon pink, striped and orange shades.

Perhaps the most durable of the red flowering potted plants available during the holiday season are the kalanchoe (*Kalanchoe blossfeldiana*) and the ornamental peppers (*Capsicum annuum*) and cherries (*Solanum capsicastrum*). While the peppers and cherries have the longer home-life, both should stay colorful at least a month in the home. Take care with the placement of these plants as they and other holiday plants have poisonous parts. Don't place them within reach of small children or pets.

Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgesii*) is a popular holiday succulent plant. New hybrids have expanded the choice of color from red to include white, purple and orange. This segmented cactus will rebloom reliably each year if kept moderately moist and in indirect light all year. In October, start withholding water for a month to force flowering.

There are several other great holiday plants that deserve recognition. Gloxinias (*Sinningia speciosa*), related to African violets (*Saintpaulia ionantha*), are low-growing, spreading plants with large, fleshy leaves and small, trumpet-shaped flowers. In general, gloxinias should be treated as African violets by avoiding high-intensity, direct sunlight and watering from the bottom with warm (at least 70 degrees F) water. Keep these plants on the moist side but not waterlogged and especially avoid cold or hot drafts. Gloxinias come in purples, whites, pinks, and bi-colors.

So you see, there are a whole lot more types of holiday plants available these days. Try something new this year to brighten your home or maybe give a holiday plant or two as gifts. Virginia agriculture provides thousands of jobs throughout the state. Don't forget to support Virginia agriculture by looking for and buying Christmas trees with the "Virginia's Finest" logo.

Editor's note:

More information on Virginia grown Christmas trees is available at these Web sites:

Va. Christmas Tree Guide: <http://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/trees/index.html>

Va. Christmas Tree Growers Association: <http://www.virginiachristmastrees.org/>